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As China takes on an increasingly prominent role in the global economy and international politics, a growing number of school districts are beginning to offer Chinese as part of their foreign language programs.

Lake Forest School District 67 officials highlighted their new Mandarin Chinese language after-school program at a recent school assembly attended by about 400 students and parents at Deer Path Middle School.

Some high school districts, such as Highland Park, Stevenson and New Trier, already are offering Chinese language instruction as part of their regular curriculum. But the Lake Forest after-school program is unique because it's one of the first in the area to offer Chinese language instruction for elementary and middle school students.

So far, approximately 25 students are enrolled in District 67's new Chinese language program, which is offered two days a week after school at Deer Path Middle School. The district also plans to offer a Chinese language program in the summer and hopes to begin offering some Chinese language classes as part of their regular foreign language curriculum beginning in the 2008-2009 academic year.

"I think eventually we're going to start offering it at all grade levels," said Harry Griffith, superintendent of both Lake Forest School District 67 and Lake Forest High School District 115.

Griffith said District 67 created the after-school Chinese language program because of community interest and to better gauge interest among the general student population.  
Major player

Griffith said he believes Chinese language instruction in the schools is important because China has become a major player in the world economy and he hopes it will "improve relations

between the United States and China through the study of language and culture.

"Many of the goods and services you and I use every day are coming from China so there's no denying the impact on our economy is significant," he said. "I think this is going to create opportunities for our youth in the future."

The after-school program is taught by Chinese language instructor Athena Chin Sawyer, a native of Taiwan. Sawyer uses maps, CDs, visuals and cultural exhibits to enhance the students' learning experience.

"The kids just love learning about other cultures at the same time they're learning the language," said Colleen Brueggeman, director of world languages for District 67.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, said he strongly supports efforts by Lake Forest and other school districts to establish Chinese language programs.

Kirk has introduced legislation aimed at increasing U.S. participation in Chinese language programs. The legislation would create federal grant programs for local school districts to offer Chinese language and cultural studies to elementary and secondary school students.

Kirk said China now has the second-largest economy and population in the world and many U.S. companies do business in China. That includes many large 10th District employers like Abbott Laboratories and Motorola.

Learning Chinese language and culture is important for U.S. students to be competitive in a global market, he said.

"There is a growing educational imbalance," said Kirk. "Two hundred million Chinese have studied English, but only 50,000 American (students) have studied Chinese."

Chinese language courses are catching on in other schools.

Sue Hebson, assistant superintendent for human resources for Highland Park-Deerfield Township High School District 113, said the district started offering Chinese language classes at the beginning of this school year at Highland Park High School. She said she believes interest in learning Chinese is growing among students.

"There are 78 students registered for Chinese for next school year, an increase of 15 students from this year," said Hebson. "It's one of the languages students can opt to take if they want foreign language credit. There aren't many schools around us that offer it so it's kind of an up and coming language I'd say."

Jim Conrey, director of public information for Stevenson High School District 125, said the high school began offering Mandarin Chinese classes for the first time this academic year and the program has 72 students enrolled.

"Every year, we survey our graduating seniors and ask them what classes that they would like us to add and Chinese was something that had been popping up consistently over the years," he said. "Also, given the emerging prominence of China on the world scene, it made sense to add it to the curriculum."